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Morgan Shipley

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# A Conversation with Wavy Gravy

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**W**avy Gravy (born Hugh Nanton Romney in 1936), is one of the most well-known figures of the 1960s counterculture. Known for his role in the founding of the legendary community Hog Farm, his part in Woodstock, his clown persona, his philanthropic work with the Seva Foundation, as well as his children's camp, Camp Winnarainbow, Wavy Gravy's personal history is deeply intertwined with that of some of the most important figures and events of the 1960s and after. In this wide-ranging conversation with Morgan Shipley, we not only gain insight into his remarkable history, but also garner some sense of his irrepressible humor and charm.

**Morgan Shipley (MS):** From the frontlines of major sixties-era protests to the official clown of the Grateful Dead, you always seemed to embody a sense of joy, of happiness. In your book, *Something Good for a Change: Random Notes on Peace Thru Living*, you describe your philosophy as "Toward the fun." Can you explain this idea or expand on its value and where it emerged from?

**Wavy Gravy (WG):** "Toward the fun" is the motto of Camp Winnarainbow, which is a circus and performing arts camp that I've run with my wife for

over thirty years. It is taken from the buzz-word of the Sufis, which is “toward the one.” That’s their spiritual explanation. We just changed the one to fun, because give me an “F.” [*Laughter*]

**MS:** How did the Camp come about? In the midst of political activism and direct action, why Sufism, why a spirituality that emphasized oneness, as the basis for a Camp?

**WG:** Camp Winnarainbow came about because my wife is a student of Sufism, and she was going to the Mendocino Woodlands for a Sufi retreat. Our son was like seven then, and she asked me to come along and babysit our son. And so I noticed—his name was Howdy Do-Good Tomahawk Truckstop Gravy Romney then—I noticed that lots of parents were not able to take part in the spiritual practices because they had kids. So I said, “hey, give me the kids.” So I ended up with a whole lot of kids and people that enjoyed working with kids, and in the next year Camp Winnarainbow came about. We have 700 kids this summer—we do 150 at a time, and we’ve been doing it for 34 years.

**MS:** Although it is a camp directed specifically toward kids, I know that you normally have a week for adults . . .

**WG:** One week for grown-ups: it’s big fun or your money back. I guarantee it. [*Laughter*]

**MS:** Do you see the camp emerging from your experience in the sixties among the hippies? For example, do you see it as a direct extension from Hog Farm? Is this something that, other than your experience with your wife at this Sufi retreat, you see as a natural extension of what you were doing or trying to do in the sixties?

**WG:** Sure. People ask what my greatest legacy is and it’s either Seva ([www.seva.org](http://www.seva.org)) or Camp Winnarainbow ([www.campwinnarainbow.org](http://www.campwinnarainbow.org)). Not that, it is the kids actually, not the camp itself, but the children who have come out of Camp Winnarainbow. And now a lot of the kids who started when they were seven, are in their thirties and are running the camp.

**MS:** I have a follow-up question about the camp's relation to the sixties, but you mentioned Seva; can you discuss this organization?

**WG:** *Seva* is a Sanskrit word that means service to human kind. We work in curable and preventable blindness in Third World countries and in Native American health care. We've done over three million sight-saving operations.

**MS:** Wonderful. Would you say then that Seva and Camp Winnarainbow extend the values or ethos of the sixties as you understand it?

**WG:** The beat goes on is my point. The sixties didn't end in the 1960s.

**MS:** That's one of the things I find most intriguing. Many contemporary narratives look at the "political side": the New Left, SDS (Students for Democratic Society), and how it declined into violence. Yet what I experience in reading someone like you is a completely different ethos, specifically with this emphasis on fun and play. Where do you see yourself fitting within the narrative of the sixties? Essentially, what did "hippie" mean to you, and what does it still mean to you today?

**WG:** First of all, we lived in buses for seven years. We had no idea that we were hippies at all, except people started calling us that. We figured maybe we are after all. My wife and I got involved surreptitiously with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters doing this traveling road show called "Can You Pass the Acid Test?" It started out with my wife and I; we were living in a house with Del Close and Tiny Tim and doing a show across from the Hollywood Ranch Market called the "Phantom Cabaret at Midnight." We decided to do a public event honoring the great Lord Buckley—Lord Richard Buckley, one of the great monologists of all time. We got permission to use this beautiful mountaintop called "Moonfire" in Topanga Canyon by Lewis Beach Martin III, who was the heir to Green Stamps. We sent out this map on how to get to this secret, sacred place on the California coast that is kind of like Sugarloaf in Rio; I mean the view like you would not believe. We sent out these invitations that read, "the flowers, yes the flowers, but the people, the people are the true flowers,

and it has been a pleasure to have momentarily strolled in your garden.” And that’s a quote from Lord Buckley.

**MS:** Beautiful invite.

**WG:** The night before the sunset, it is pouring rain, pouring rain, and people are phoning, “what are you going to do, what are you going to do?” And I said, “well, why don’t we just see how it is in the morning?” I get up in the morning, and it’s pouring rain, and I go down into the kitchen, and there’s 50 people in Day-Glo clothes cooking eggs. That’s the Grateful Dead and the Merry Pranksters who arrived to do their traveling road show called “Can You Pass the Acid Test?” at the Unitarian Church in the Valley. After a while, we called off the sunset, and I got everybody to go to the Unitarian Church in the Valley. But, as the sun was thinking about setting, Ken Babbs, who was Kesey’s lieutenant, threw me the keys to a rental car, and a bunch of us drove to that mountaintop and witnessed the most beautiful sunset that I have ever seen, and I’ve traveled all over the world. Nothing to equal it. I was so ashamed that Lord Buckley did his part, and we didn’t even show up. So it always has been, ever since then, that no matter what the circumstances—fire, earthquake, flood—if we are on the flyer to be somewhere, we are there, even if we are the only ones. And we’ve discovered we are that much richer for it.

**MS:** How did this experience, and your time with the Acid Tests, lead to communal projects? How did the Hog Farm emerge from these various experiences?

**WG:** We did this Acid Test thing, we did a bunch of them, we did Watts [Acid Test], and then my wife and I were looking to kind of go a little bucolic and get out of the pile. We went to this lovely little cabin in Sunland, California in the Verdugo Hills and got a call from the Pranksters to come in and pose for a cover of *Life Magazine* on psychedelia. *Life Magazine* was a big deal back then; it was the biggest deal actually. While we were posing for the cover of *Life Magazine*, Ken Babbs stole the bus, so my wife and I had 35 houseguests. The landlord came by and said, “look, you can’t have 37 people living in one room—you’re

evicted.” And in the land of kitchen synchronicity, a neighbor came by and said, “Old Saul up on the mountain just had a stroke; they need somebody to slop them hogs.” And so we were given a mountaintop rent-free if we would take care of 60 hogs the size of davenport. [Laughter]

**MS:** How did this pragmatic work coincide with experiences from the Acid Tests? How did the “hippie” label continue to expand at this time?

**WG:** We put together a lightshow called the “The Single Wing Turquoise Bird,” and we would appear Saturday nights at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles with all the great rock bands of the world. And I would do energy games with the audience. Then on Sunday we would have a free celebration on our mountaintop. People came from all over, and every Sunday was a different theme, like mud Sunday. We built a theater for Tiny Tim once, and there was kite Sunday. We had a hog rodeo where we painted up the pigs and rode around on them.

**MS:** At what point did you hit the road with Hog Farm? Was the goal to introduce people to new ways of experiencing everyday life?

**WG:** We were given a bus by our mechanics, who lived as part of the collective. We painted it up and made a film for Otto Preminger called *Skidoo* [1968]. We began driving around the country putting on these shows called “The Hog Farm and Friends in Open Celebration.” We were sponsored by the Students for Democratic Society and the Interfraternity Council.

**MS:** Interesting. Going back to your comment on kitchen synchronicity, it appears that many of your projects emerged organically, that you specifically, and the Hog Farm more generally, were always willing to experience the moment here and now. In a similar way, one that challenges the politicocultural divide, these “open celebrations” seemed to, for lack of a better word, transcend the dominant political divide on 1960s college campuses.

**WG:** We were the only thing that those two groups would ever agree upon. We would pull into a football field and turn off the buses. We had a

convoy of maybe eight buses. At around 8:30, 9:00 o'clock in the morning, students start[ed] banging on the bus: "when is this thing gonna start?" And we'd say, "hey, grab a wrench." [*Laughter*]

**WG:** We'd put up these ginormous geodesic domes with triangles that clipped on, so we could project on part of them. We had 500 people painting. We had overhead projectors and microphones; I mean it was just a tremendous event that was a palette where people would bring their own hits. We did not believe in dosing people; that was a bad move. People could come, and we would set up a palette where they could discover that they were the stars of the show. We traveled from coast to coast that way.

**MS:** Was the emphasis always on the group and helping people uncover, or realize, their potential or some new experience?

**WG:** It was a combination of a happening and an anti-war celebration, and a consciousness-raising event; you name it.

**MS:** How long did you hold these events?

**WG:** We were on the road for seven years, and of course we eventually settled down. We were looking to evacuate New York City; Bob Kaufman said "cities should be built on one side of the street." We had a little farm that was donated to us in Pennsylvania, and an enormous loft in New York City, where this guy showed up at the kitchen table and said, "how would you guys like to do this music festival in New York State?" We said "well we're going to be in New Mexico," and he said "that's all right, we will fly you in on an astrojet." We thought he was a lunatic, one toke over the line, and didn't pay him any attention. We said "we are going to be up in Tesuque Meadow, up above Santa Fe for the summer solstice." This guy shows up with an attaché case full of the paperwork, so, indeed we had our own American Airlines astrojet for 85 of us and 15 Indians to fly to Kennedy.

**MS:** You are discussing the origin of your role as the "Please Force" at Woodstock correct?

**WG:** Yes. We had arranged with the promoters of this music festival, called the “Aquarian Arts Woodstock” . . . whatever. [*Laughter*]

**WG:** We had arranged to do a free kitchen and fire trails. I had a bear suit and a rubber shovel so if hippies built a stupid fire, I could burst out of the bushes and do my Smokey the Bear imitation. And pound them with the rubber shovel. But when we poured out of the aircraft at Kennedy, there was the world press, with all their lights and cameras, “oh the Hog Farm—you guys are the security.” I said, “my God, they made us the cops.” [*Laughter*]

**WG:** I said, “well, do you feel secure?” The guy said “yeah”; I said “well, see, it’s working.” He got really mad and said, “come on, what are you going to use for riot control?” I said “uh, uh, cream pies and seltzer bottles.” They all wrote it down, and I thought “the power of manipulating the media.” I guess my moment of truth at Woodstock was when I said, “Good morning! What we have in mind is breakfast in bed for 400,000,” which is when we introduced hippies to granola. They had never seen it before. They were enmeshed in mud in their sleeping bags, and we brought it to them in Dixie cups. They looked at it and said, “what is this shit, gravel?” [*Laughter*]

**WG:** But they ate it, and they enjoyed it. The granola manufacturers of the world owe us an enormous debt.

**MS:** What was your goal, or plan, post-Woodstock?

**WG:** We went from there back to New Mexico and were scooped up immediately to do the Texas Pop Festival, where I got my name from B.B. King. He says, “you Wavy Gravy?” I said, “yes, sir.” [*Laughter*]

**MS:** And ever since that’s what you’ve gone by.

**WG:** Absolutely.

**MS:** How long and in what capacity did Hog Farm stay on the road?



**WG:** Let's see, we lived in buses for seven years. The last big bus trip, we drove two buses from London to the Himalayas.

**MS:** What was the goal of that project?

**WG:** We were taking food and medical supplies to Pakistan. This is all in the new movie, the Hog Farm movie, which is called *Saint Misbehavin': The Wavy Gravy Movie*, and is opening in theaters all over the country as we speak.

**MS:** I look forward to that. Are you involved in promoting the movie?

**WG:** I am promoting it tonight; I have to go and do a Q&A after the screening.

**MS:** Very good. I was hoping we could return to the idea and legacy of the sixties. You discussed earlier how you and your wife felt a need to go bucolic, to drop out, a phrase often used to critique or decry the hippie project. However, in the sixties, this idea often held a more idyllic promise. In reading your book, or other communal figures like Stephen Gaskin, dropping out seemed to represent a refusal to play the game as it normally had been played, as opposed to a refusal to even play. When you said you left, it seemed simultaneously like you got even more engaged with people in trying to change consciousness on a variety of levels. This was no longer politics as we normally see it, but something that was more directed at the person and their experience in community.

**WG:** Politically, first of all, I helped run a pig for president. [*Laughter*]

**WG:** She was very famous, her name was Pigasus. She was the first female black and white candidate. We broke a lot of ground with the pig. Then in '72, we ran a rock for president and a roll for vice-president. At different rallies we'd pass out different rolls—like bagels, or jelly rolls, cinnamon rolls—you could always eat the vice-president as the roll kept changing. Then I spaced the rock out in a taxicab.

**MS:** Was this your way of rejecting politics as is?

**WG:** This is when I got into the idea of “Nobody for President”—that came up the spinal telegraph. “Nobody’s Perfect”; “Nobody Keeps All Campaign Promises”; “Nobody Bakes Apple Pie Better than Mom”; “Nobody Lowers Your Taxes”; it just goes on and on and on. I became “Nobody’s Fool”; we turned our bus into the “Nobody One.” because they have Air Force One. We used clicking teeth for the speeches. We ran “Nobody” all the way up until this last election when I supported Obama. The news got on my case and I said, “look, Nobody made me do it.” [Laughter]

**WG:** So they couldn’t argue with that.

**MS:** Given what we were just discussing, from Pigasus through the ubiquity of Nobody for President, to your most recent support of Obama, would you say that traditional, democratic politics as the way it has been run here in the United States, is not effective in terms of bringing about change, specifically in terms of poverty, inequality, and hunger? What was the impetus for you to eschew traditional politics and pursue a mixture of fun, absurdity, and comedy ultimately aimed, however, at the important, central issues that traditional politics seemingly couldn’t handle?

**WG:** I got arrested a lot, and I got beat up a lot. I was very enamored by the fool in the Tarot—fools often get to the ear of the king and speak truth to power. But the fool also occasionally gets strangled by the king. I was facing a third spinal fusion. During this time, some docs came by our house—we were running a telephone answering service called “Babylon.” It was ideal for a commune, because everybody took turns working the switchboards and what have you. I was asked to go to Oakland Children’s Hospital and cheer up the kids. On the way out the door, somebody handed me a red, rubber nose. After about a year of being a clown and getting giant shoes and the whole nine yards, I was asked to go to the People’s Park in Berkeley for a political demonstration. When I showed up at this demonstration, I discovered I didn’t have time to take my makeup off; and my God, the police didn’t want to hit me anymore. Why? Clowns are not a threat to them; they’re safe. I actually got to buy out every red, rubber nose in Kansas City and Missouri and put them on the

under-the-counterculture when the Republicans were having their convention in the Kempner Arena in Kansas City. [*Laughter*]

**WG:** The police could not club all the clowns on the color TV. So I often have discovered that I get arrested frequently for stuff that I believe in, just as either Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, and they don't want to mess with them either.

**MS:** Based on these experiences, do you think that an artistic engagement in social activism, that de-emphasizes violence and plays with form, is something missing today?

**WG:** I am pushing it hard. I talked to the kids in "Not in Our Name." I was flown to New York to do a whole stage thing with a lot of young activists at the Theater for the New City. I think I was pretty convincing about how to do your thing, but do it creatively. Not just more yelling, but use your creative imagination. I refer to myself as a positive-creative anarchist. We use humor as a tool.

**MS:** Very interesting designation. I like that a lot. What you are describing seems to be something so missing since the sixties . . .

**WG:** We did the Moratorium. We used black balloons and kazoos when the police charged. We just played silent night on the Kazoos, and they totally shorted out, they didn't know what to do. It slowed them down; they had to reconsider things. When they tear gassed us, I had one of those laugh boxes that you hit a button and the thing laughs. It was hilarious in the middle of the tear gas to hear this thing cracking up. [*Laughter*]

**MS:** Was this at People's Park?

**WG:** No, that was in Washington, D.C., at the Moratorium. We put a half million people in the street, maybe a million.

**MS:** Do you understand your form or method, specifically humor as a tool, as not something that should be separate or distinct from politics?

Oftentimes we hear that culture should be separate from politics, but you seem to always argue, and personify, the reverse—that cultural expressions and politics should be brought together in the most effective way possible.

**WG:** Absolutely, absolutely. I think that when the nit comes to the grit, and I've gotten down with these young people, that they tend to agree more than disagree with my whole philosophy.

**MS:** It is refreshing to engage a cultural and political perspective that runs counter to narratives or methods of more violence or more direct engagement that refuse any sort of reflexive action. I think that humor and comedy, specifically in the way you have pursued it, consistently permits reflexive postmoments, where you can reflect back on the nature of the situation and the resulting actions. A creative impulse seems to demand more reflection—is this something you aim for?

**WG:** A lot of the “Not in Our Name” kids, and what have you, are experimenting more and more with creative solutions and are becoming more and more electronically hooked up. We discovered that, rather than putting a million people in the streets against the war and Bush just not paying attention, we also needed, in addition to some protesting in the street, to use more and more of the internet to get our point across.

**MS:** There are many voices that might argue against using apparatuses of the System—including the internet. Do you believe, specifically with the growth of technology, in just using the mediums we are presented with, as opposed to rejecting them? Are you saying we need to be more creative in the ways we approach change?

**WG:** Yes. Truth is what you can use; I think that you should use everything. Everything.

**MS:** Very true. In your book you often discuss truth, and it seems that the hippies more generally often emphasized the need to get to the truth of daily realities, specifically in the ways we deal with one another. One of the key things I wanted to ask you about is what your thoughts are on this

idea of community, which seems so essential in everything you have done, including street protests. With Hog Farm still active, with Camp Winnarainbow . . .

**WG:** Absolutely, we have a little hippie Hyannisport in Berkeley. About a 12 bedroom situation. Our kid's camp winter office is part of the complex here. I call it a hippie Hyannisport. We still have a hundred acres up north where I do my children's camp, and we do a big concert there called the Kate Wolf Memorial Concert. We use to do Earthdance. One of the members of our family is a bioengineer and has done all this creek and gully restoration. People come from all over the world to see what he has done with organic material à la Aldo Leopold. We have a women who has a green thumb—she is even from Ireland—and runs our organic farm. Most of the produce that the kids eat at Camp Winnarainbow is just out of the ground a couple of hours. We have a lot going on. Evan [Evan Engber, Principal Bioengineer, Bioengineering Associates, Inc.] moved the whole Eel River on a project with big, giant, earth-moving machines and boulders. He does lots of things with willow, and weaving rocks into a nest made out of willows. It has to be seen to be believed.

**MS:** This is on the Hog Farm property?

**WG:** Yes, it's called Black Oak Ranch. You are aware that there is a book called *Communities*, and it lists intentional communities all over the country. There are more intentional communities now than there ever were in the sixties.

**MS:** Absolutely, that is one of the things that appears most interesting, given histories of the counterculture, or sixties more broadly, that emphasize a steady decline.

**WG:** It is kind of low-key, though, and I think that is ok too. But The Farm is still going in Tennessee.

**MS:** Absolutely. I actually went down there a year-and-a-half ago along with a colleague. We interviewed Stephen Gaskin for this same journal.

**WG:** I taught school in that brick schoolhouse.

**MS:** Did you? How much interaction or direct engagement did you have with other communes from the sixties and even today? Is there still an active, wider community base or wider network, where you still go out and visit these other places and talk? Or is that something that was more in the sixties and seventies?

**WG:** From time to time. Seventies. Eighties. Nineties. [*Laughter*]

**WG:** It is all—I have nostalgia for the future, that’s what I get from the kids at camp. But, yes. Ina May and all her amazing work with birthing and midwifery. We have a couple doctors on our spread. One woman has a doctorate in nursing and the other is a doctor. Those two women have a small clinic on the property also. We have our own fire truck.

**MS:** It continues to be a self-sufficient community, then, in many ways.

**WG:** In many ways absolutely. In many, many ways.

**MS:** As a self-sufficient community, but also as a space that you encourage people to visit and experience, and from your various camps to organic farming, what is the legacy today? Do you think that Black Oak Ranch is a communal model to aspire to? Or a place that provides a potential to demonstrate a different way to be and be together?

**WG:** Well, you get your gang together, and you decide what you want to do, and you do it. But most people gather together—it makes sense to get a bunch of people together to rent a nice house, otherwise it’s kind of difficult. Or to buy one is ludicrous. But if you get a bunch of people together, and all chip in on the rent and maybe share in daily needs. For example, everybody in our family takes turn cooking. We have community meals Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday it’s everyone for themselves. We have kids to get to school—we don’t have a school on the property—the kids go to school.

**MS:** How many people do you have living year-round on Black Oak Ranch?

**WG:** Year-round? Probably around 25. Something like that.

**MS:** I would like to go back to an earlier discussion, if we can. When you were discussing your initial coming to be, specifically your time traveling on the buses, you talked about your role in the Acid Tests, and in passing, mentioned the Merry Pranksters, the Grateful Dead, and the refusal to dose people. What role did the drug culture play in terms of providing an outlet, or maybe the initial impetus, for consciousness raising? Was it something for everyone? One avenue that people were experimenting with, and then sharing with other people? How do you recall or talk about the importance of the psychedelic moment?

**WG:** Suddenly realizing the interconnectedness of everything was huge for me. I have a line “we are all the same person trying to shake hands with ourself.”

**MS:** I like that.

**WG:** Thank you. I’m still trying to figure out exactly what that means, but that’s kind of the beauty of it. [*Laughter*]

**MS:** That is an absolutely true statement. You talk about interconnectedness, and it emerges often in your writing and projects; where did this insight come from for you? Was it during an Acid Test? Was it other direct experiences that you had? What really got you to think that you needed to spend the rest of your life demonstrating to people how you can be caring and altruistic?

**WG:** I think that we were encrusted with a lot of karmic baggage. Everybody was mostly imbued with their self-importance and thought that getting a bunch of stuff was the answer to it—to see whoever had the most stuff is the most important person. I think that it is pretty much the other way around. Less is less is less. What you need to do is to jump into my book, *Something Good for a Change*. This is a slippery slope for me, because I run this children’s camp. And a lot of that stuff was 40 years ago.

**MS:** Completely understandable. I know you are running short on time. To maybe end with this theme of interconnectedness, I was hoping you could share one of your songs?

**WG:** Absolutely. And wouldn't it be neat, if the people that you meet had shoes upon their feet and something to eat. And wouldn't it be fine now if all humankind had shelter. Basic human needs. Basic human deeds. Doing what comes naturally. Down in the garden where no one is apart. Deep down in the garden, the garden of your heart.

**MS:** Beautiful, thank you so much.

**WG:** Absolutely. Have a great night.